



**NOAA Fisheries Service
Southwest Region**

NEWS RELEASE

Southwest Region, 501 W. Ocean Blvd, Suite 4200, Long Beach, CA 90802

Contact: Mike Fergus (562) 980-4022 / (888) 472-5680 beeper
mike.fergus@noaa.gov

For Immediate Release
February 26, 1998

FISHERIES SERVICE PROPOSES PROTECTION FOR CHINOOK SALMON IN CALIFORNIA

The NOAA Fisheries Service is proposing to protect distinct Chinook Salmon populations in the California Central Valley and North Coast Basins under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by this time next year, the Service announced today at a Sacramento press conference.

Proposed for listing are the Spring-Run Chinook as 'Endangered' and the Fall-Run as 'Threatened' in the Central Valley. The North Coast Basin populations would be listed as 'Threatened'. Each of these populations are considered an Evolutionary Significant Unit (ESU) under the ESA. Also being proposed is the designation of critical habitat for each of the ESU's.

"Our West Coast salmon face an uncertain future, but extinction is not an option," said Terry Garcia, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and Deputy Administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "NOAA's highest priority in the next year is to build strong partnerships leading to conservation initiatives that save these salmon runs and foster sustainable use of these species and their habitats. This is an opportunity for the states to work with us in crafting recovery solutions."

"Today's announcement is the beginning of the final stages of the listing process for salmon populations begun more than a decade ago. By this time next year, we will have completed the evaluation of all the salmon populations, and we will turn full time to the business of recovery," said Garcia.

"Although these actions are just proposals at the present time, there must be no mistake about the ultimate intent of our action here today," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries southwest regional office at a press conference in Sacramento, California. "Whether these populations recover due to a 'listing action' or implementation of a viable state restoration plan is of no concern to the fish." Hogarth further emphasized that NOAA much prefers state action as opposed to an ESA listing as the avenue to healthy fish stocks.

- more -

(chinook release - cont.)

pg 2

In review of overall chinook populations and apparent healthy abundance levels of the Fall-Run for example, Hogarth pointed out that the natural wild stock is in trouble. "We're not listing hatchery fish, rather the seriously depleted wild stock." As increased hatchery production enhances increased catch, the wild stock catch also goes up, but without an accompanying increase in spawning. Other factors affecting the health of these fish vary from place to place, but typically include dam construction and operation, over harvesting, certain hatchery practices, and land-use and water-development projects that degrade water and river conditions key to salmon survival.

"We recognize the strong potential consequences this action will have to the fishery if some viable recovery action is not in place within a year. However, we are hopeful that measures can be developed that will satisfy requirements of the ESA, allowing us to take advantage of the Law's flexibility of not having to list," Hogarth said. Potential mitigating measures embodied in the Central Valley Project Improvement Act program and the California-Federal Bay Delta Accord may prove invaluable toward heading-off a listing for the Fall Run Chinook.

Today's proposal is one of many actions resulting from a comprehensive status review of west coast chinook salmon that identified 15 ESU's. Generally applied, a 'threatened' status implies that a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. An 'endangered' status is applied to any species that is in danger of extinction throughout all, or a significant portion, of its range.

"These proposals should serve as a message to all of us that the status quo is simply unacceptable," Garcia added.

NOAA is soliciting 90 days of comments and suggestions from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, and other interested parties on this proposal. Public hearings, sites not yet determined, will be held to facilitate this process. Public announcement will be made regarding dates, times, and locations. Written comments can be sent to Craig Wingert, NOAA Fisheries Svc., Protected Resources Division, 501 W. Ocean Blvd., Ste. 4200, Long Beach, CA 90802-4213.

The Service will review all comments, suggestions, and recommendation and any new scientific information before making its final decisions in early 1999.

Additional specific information describing this proposal, including maps and fact sheets, is available on the NOAA Northwest Region website at www.nwr.noaa.gov. The Federal Register notice containing this proposal is available at the Government Printing Office's website at www.gpo.gov.

#